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# To George Orwell, II; Is It 1984 yet?

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# To George Orwell, II; Is It 1984 yet?

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# To George Orwell, II; Is It 1984 yet?

Posted on **June 1, 2009** by **Editor**



**Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow**

In our last issue we treated the Amazon Kindle [1] — perhaps best described as a web-enabled text-reading device—as the subject for a technology review [2] and dealt primarily with the question of how it works, and its advantages for us at the Berglund Center. Here we treat it rather as a looming cultural force, addressing some of the concerns that have been raised about the spread of such devices, and speculate about some of the less fortunate effects it might have.

After buying the Kindle and using it to read a very complicated work on the recent economy, William D. Cohan's *House of Cards: A Tale of Hubris and Wretched Excess on Wall Street*, [3] I saw that the Kindle had real advantages for reviewing such a work. It let me quickly look up unfamiliar technical terms from the world of Wall Street, do thorough searches, and when writing, pull up hundreds of notes I had taken to review the work. I also used the Kindle to read Arthur Phillips' *The Song is You*, reviewed in this issue. [4] However, I thought at the time that my future use of the Kindle might well be limited more to texts and complex works like Cohan's and not include lighter reading.

Accordingly, when I spotted Jeffrey Deaver's new work *The Broken Window* on the shelves, I unhesitatingly bought it in paperback for review in August as it deals with the dangers of data mining in a fictional context. I worked through the book, folding pages over, underlining, jotting a few notes in the opening pages: my usual approach to reviewing novels. Finally, however, when trying to squeeze into the margins yet another annotation on the works' relevance to the impact of the Internet, I had to ask myself if this wouldn't better be done on the Kindle. I opened the Kindle, went to Amazon.com's site, and found to my horror that the book was not yet formatted for Kindle. However, while I was browsing, it appeared; Jeff Bezos (the founder and president of Amazon.com) knows my every need! I downloaded it and returned to my reading.

The experience of a "light read" was in no way diminished. I read more comfortably and quickly on the Kindle now than in paper copy. But the change is as great as that made by a medieval monk reading in a lambskin scroll, then moving to a codex, a true book bound between wooden covers. And from the point of view of producing and then reproducing text, the jump from

paperback to Kindle is, I think, going to be as great as that from the hand-written codex to a Gutenberg type-set printing. But reading on the Kindle is a bookish experience only in a limited sense.

My life has been lived among books, and certainly my living has depended upon writing and reading and explaining them, whether in lecture or pieces such as this one. So what will I—and possibly you—miss when reading on the Kindle? In my case, not much.

I believe that we over-romanticize books. I think that many common declarations of loyalty to the book form amount to saying: “I am highly literate!” Many of these declarations are quite emotional. One common one deals, oddly, with olfactory loyalties: we like the way books smell, period. This is a common reaction to the Kindle—it doesn’t smell like a book. Incredibly, to me at least, a Google search on the text “smell of a book and the kindle” produced 398,000 hits! [5]

True, the smell of books often brings up happy memories of particular books and the places where I read or wrote them. But when I get beyond that emotional level, in fact, books smell like petrochemicals and dead trees. I think I can get beyond the smell issue, and all other issues related to form vs. content, and I am sure that the generation now growing up reading on the web is not going to think about them very long, if at all.

However, there are other issues which should be considered. If we were to take as an analogy the impact of downloadable MP3 files upon the recording and related industries, we can see that the results of a shift to text-reading appliances could be far reaching indeed. And after all, while music is very important, as is film, neither is even remotely comparable to reading in its cultural impact. A great deal will change once the Kindle and related highly portable text reading devices take off, as I believe they inevitably will.

When we examine the dark side of the Internet at the Berglund Center a number of issues arise. One of these is pornography. The Internet has stimulated the spread of porn, and it is has proven very difficult to regulate in an electronic environment. [6] The Kindle will further complicate this issue. Successful prosecutions (some have preferred the term *persecutions*) of adult fare as legally pornographic have usually turned upon either the subject matter—children especially—or upon issues of community standards. The Internet is particularly vulnerable to attack as children can easily gain access to pornography and some sites will violate “community standards,” usually in some carefully selected (by prosecutors) bastion of traditional values.

The Kindle is the ultimate plain brown wrapper for erotica or porn. [7] Some entrepreneurs are rapidly taking advantage of this new market niche. See, for example, the website “The Erotic Reader.” [8] We think it will not be long until family-value conservatives raise a hue and cry over this particular issue, and the resulting legal tangle will be labyrinthine.

Books, on the other hand, have seldom been banned in the 21st century, in part because they are more easily controlled by parents, and they perhaps seem more a matter of individual taste

and choice than does the Internet. A recent unfortunate decision by Amazon.com to de-list what have been called “Gay books,” although the exact nature of the categories banned is still unclear, raised an immediate firestorm on the Internet. Amazon quickly recanted. [9]

Distributing texts via download, however, will raise other issues. I joked above about Jeff Bezos knowing my needs. This is unlikely, but his corporation can easily ascertain my tastes in reading—his minions send me email linked to previous purchases on a weekly basis. Jeff seems like a 21st century sort of guy, and I am O.K. with that. But I am less certain about other authority figures in my life. I am also less certain about other types of books. At my age, a sudden taste for erotica would probably seem more like nostalgia than mortal sin. But I certainly don’t plan to order any terrorist manuals for my Kindle anytime soon, as interested as I am in contemporary events.

And we know from any number of recent events that in fact one’s reading taste can easily come back to haunt one. Steven Wax, noted Federal Public Defender for Oregon, and a speaker at a Berglund Center Roundtable, [10] cites an example in his recent work *Kafka Comes to America* of prosecutors citing possession of particular books and visits to certain Internet sites as evidence of criminal wrongdoing. [11]

The Kindle raises other issues relative to censorship. There are many ways to produce and circulate a book so as to avoid censorship. We have the example of Soviet *Samizdat*, the clandestine distribution of copies of uncensored works, frequently Western ones critical of the Soviet regime, sometimes credited with laying the foundation for the end of the Soviet Union. [12]

A Kindle text, like any electronic data, is easily lost or altered. I had the experience, for example, of canceling an order after it had begun downloading. I then watched it being sucked off my Kindle—poof, it was gone. We have the above example of Amazon.com delisting certain controversial types of works. If Amazon were ordered to by a powerful government in an important market area to recover all copies of a certain work might it do so? In Saudi Arabia, if all the works of Rushdie should be declared heretical, would the Saudi government suck them off Saudi Kindles? What then are the opportunities for *Samizdat* style circulation, presuming, of course, that only electronic copies have been sold. [13] This raises directly the issue of the Digital Divide.

Recently, Reed College in Portland entered into an agreement with Amazon.com to use in its classes the new Kindle DX, [14] a very recent iteration of the Kindle with a bigger screen more suitable for detailed graphics or larger layouts such as found in science texts. At present, the classes will offer the students a choice of Kindle texts or conventional ones.

There is, however, an economic force inevitably at work here; the production and distribution of a Kindle text must be many times less expensive to the publisher than are hard copy equivalents. This means that costs can be lower to the consumer—my Kindle books rarely cost more than ten dollars, while the hard copy equivalent may be forty dollars. Some out of copyright works are

also available as free downloads. Obviously, this reduced cost is a social good.

But as Kindle-type texts become more dominant, hard copy books, according to the laws of supply and demand, will become more expensive. [15] The Kindle or its competitors will doubtless become cheaper, but there are now many schoolchildren, in Oregon at least, who can no longer afford lunches, and whose families are losing their homes. For them, even paperback books are a luxury and a Kindle an unthinkable extravagance.

And what of libraries? As attractive as the notion of storing 2500 texts on a Kindle might be, as the costs of books inevitably climb, even popular ones could become as expensive as are science texts at present, when a student can easily pay eighty dollars and more. Hard copy collections will become correspondingly more expensive.

One result of electronic text readers such as the Kindle will be, we think, a greatly widened digital divide. It is possible to imagine various devices such as Kindles available in some well-financed suburban libraries or being checked out like laptops at private schools, but such solutions seem highly unlikely to be widespread, at least in the United States' public schools.

There are many other issues. The question of Intellectual Property rights, or at least the prevention of illegal distribution, is going to be a major problem. At present, I can sell my used books or donate them, entirely without legal restraint so far as I am aware. I cannot, however, I recently found, register our office Kindle under both a personal account and under a Berglund account. I presume that this is to prevent the sharing of the machine itself.

And what of sharing texts? I get excited by my reading and want to force it upon hapless others. I can loan a book; I cannot easily share a Kindle file, even if my friend also possessed a Kindle. I am quite certain that there are those who will assert that Kindle file sharing is a violation of somebody's rights. I am equally certain that it can and is being done, and will be very difficult to trace or prevent. It will be interesting to see how this aspect of Kindle usage develops.

There are other issues that should concern us. One is certainly the damage to the bookstore industry. Many local stores have been killed by the Internet. Some of these have survived after a fashion by going on line and selling electronically via the Internet. This is not going to be a cheap or an easy option following the widespread impact of Kindle-like devices. It is clearly in the interest of the makers of such devices to maintain a chokehold on as many proprietary elements of the text and its delivery as possible.

We also believe that Amazon.com, having gotten well out ahead of the industry in general, is going to be an overwhelming opponent for potential competitors. What we should expect, then, is additional concentration within the publishing industries, and a marked reduction in places for authors to sell their works. [16] Many old and honored presses are going to go the way of major urban newspapers which seemed unassailable ten years ago.

Speaking of newspapers, and periodicals, mightn't the impact of the Kindle, which can deliver a daily paper or a weekly or monthly magazine as conveniently as a bestseller, have equivalent consequences? We believe, of course, that it will.

To answer the question posed by our provocative title, is it 1984 yet? Perhaps not in an Orwellian sense...but it is getting much closer to 2024, by which time we fully expect the entire face of reading and the industries and individuals it currently supports to be unrecognizable.

## Endnotes

[1] Because it is so awkward to continually write "text-reading devices" we use the word "Kindle" here to represent the entire coming flood of such technologies.

[2] See the review at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/04/article.php?id=68>

[3] See it at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/04/article.php?id=65>

[4] *The Song is You* review in this issue <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2009/04/article.php?id=78>

[5] Search on May 20 at: <http://www.google.com/search?q=smell+of+a+book+and+the+kindle&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>

[6] We wrote on this issue in "X? XX? Or XXX? The Internet and Pornography" at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/04/edit.php>

[7] This is already becoming a cultural issue. A search performed the text string "Kindle porn" on May 20 2009 produced 425,000 hits at: <http://www.google.com/search?q=kindle+porn&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a>

[8] <http://www.theeroticreader.com/instant-erotica.html>

[9] See the early stages of the controversy at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2009/apr/13/amazon-gay-writers>

[10] To see Wax's presentation go to: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/roundtables/Presentations/2009/index.php#wax>

[11] Steven Wax, *Kafka Comes to America*, New York: Other Press, 2008, p, 137-8.

[12] See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samizdat> for a discussion of this genre and its effects.

[13] This may seem farfetched, but there are a number of current examples of the threat of libel

suits causing books already in print to be pulped. See

<http://barthsnotes.wordpress.com/2007/08/05/cambridge-university-press-agrees-to-pulp-book-on-terrorist-financing/>

[14] See it at: [http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0015TCML0/?tag=googhydr-20&hvadid=3482997509&ref=pd\\_sl\\_19djrsy7gv\\_e](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0015TCML0/?tag=googhydr-20&hvadid=3482997509&ref=pd_sl_19djrsy7gv_e)

[15] I use “law” of course with tongue in cheek after watching gasoline prices over the last few years.

[16] I recognize also that authors may well develop small niche markets for their works and format them themselves and deliver them on line. This may well mean an end to ‘blockbusters’ as few will be able to afford the time to labor away on a large book. This may mean, again, a concentration as a few authors work their way laboriously to high status and widespread distribution.

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#### 14 THOUGHTS ON “TO GEORGE ORWELL, II; IS IT 1984 YET?”

**Editor**

on **June 1, 2009 at 4:00 PM** said:

Poster Name: Forexsaste

Message: Thank you, friends, for your sharing your ideas.

**Editor**

on **June 1, 2009 at 4:01 PM** said:

Poster Name: Jeffrey Barlow

Message: Here, I am in the odd position of commenting upon my own article. Recently, we experienced the highly ironic event in which Amazon actually did remove content from readers\' kindles. Ironically, the works removed include Orwell\'s 1984 and Animal Farm to which Amazon did not have the resale rights. For discussion of these events see: <http://www.google.com/search?q=kindle+and+orwell&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a> I found particularly interesting this piece: <http://www.ddmcd.com/process/CreateJournalEntryComment?moduleId=140085&entryId=4668708> Thanks for reading Interface! Jeffrey



**Editor**

on **June 1, 2009 at 4:01 PM** said:

Poster Name: Dennis McDonald

Message: Jeffrey – thanks for the comment! I agree with your assessment that many reactons to ebooks tend to be more emotional than logical. I enjoy the smell of books as much as the next guy — I still remember what my father’s Tom Swift books smell like — but I do like the ability to increase font size at will! Dennis ps – the correct link to my blog post is: <http://www.ddmcd.com/ungood.html>

**best toilet**

on **February 1, 2014 at 11:24 AM** said:

I am curious to find out what blog system you happen to be working with?  
I’m experiencing some small security issues with my latest website  
and I would like to find something more secure. Do you have any solutions?

**best rifle scope**

on **February 3, 2014 at 10:50 PM** said:

Hey I know this is off topic but I was wondering if you knew of  
any widgets I could add to my blog that automatically tweet my newest twitter updates.

I’ve been looking for a plug-in like this for quite some time and was  
hoping maybe you would have some experience with something like  
this. Please let me know if you run into anything. I  
truly enjoy reading your blog and I look forward to your  
new updates.

**folding bike reviews**

on **February 3, 2014 at 11:45 PM** said:

Hello just wanted to give you a brief heads up and let you know a few of the pictures aren't loading properly. I'm not sure why but I think its a linking issue. I've tried it in two different browsers and both show the same results.

**jig saw reviews**

on **February 4, 2014 at 12:43 AM** said:

Appreciating the dedication you put into your website and detailed information you offer. It's nice to come across a blog every once in a while that isn't the same out of date rehashed material. Fantastic read! I've bookmarked your site and I'm adding your RSS feeds to my Google account.

**best clothes steamer**

on **February 4, 2014 at 1:38 AM** said:

I'm very happy to uncover this website. I wanted to thank you for ones time due to this fantastic read!! I definitely liked every little bit of it and i also have you saved to fav to check out new information on your blog.

**best table saw**

on **February 4, 2014 at 2:48 AM** said:

Hey there! I've been following your web site for a while now and finally got the bravery to go ahead and give you a shout out from Humble Texas! Just wanted to mention keep up the excellent job!

**best garbage disposal**

on **February 4, 2014 at 5:00 AM** said:

If you desire to take much from this article then you have to apply these methods to your won web site.

**best crossfit shoes**

on **February 4, 2014 at 5:26 AM** said:

I would like to thank you for the efforts you've put in penning this site. I really hope to view the same high-grade content by you in the future as well. In fact, your creative writing abilities has inspired me to get my own, personal website now 😊

**best electric kettle**

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:21 PM** said:

You actually make it appear so easy along with your presentation however I to find this matter to be really one thing that I feel I'd by no means understand. It sort of feels too complicated and extremely broad for me. I'm looking forward to your next put up, I'll attempt to get the hang of it!

**cork board ideas**

on **February 5, 2014 at 12:57 PM** said:

This is a really good tip particularly to those new to the blogosphere. Brief but very accurate info

**Gertrud England**

on **February 6, 2014 at 12:57 PM** said:

Yo estaba buscando para encontrar respuestas en este tema en particular y el Blog ocurrió primero en la búsqueda de Google, pero no puedo encontrar nada en esta

página que es incluso un poco que ver con lo que necesito